

# EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN DEVELOPING NATIONS: A Roundtable Dialogue

MEETING SUMMARY

**BEPS**

Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity

CREATIVE ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL

*In collaboration with*

CARE, THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, AND GROUNDWORK



United States Agency for International Development  
Contract No. HNE-I-00-00-00038-00

***EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES  
IN DEVELOPING NATIONS:  
A Roundtable Dialogue***

**November 14, 2002  
8:30am to 12:30pm**

**MEETING SUMMARY**

The Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity  
Contract No. HNE-I-00-00-00038-00  
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**Prepared For:**

The Global Bureau  
Human Capacity Development Center  
US Agency for International Development

## PREFACE

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On November 14, 2002 Creative Associates International hosted a roundtable, sponsored by the US Agency for International Development, to bring together professionals with interest and experience in “Educating Children with Disabilities in Developing Nations.” The goals of the session were as follows.

1. **Review current needs and issues** in educating children with disabilities in developing nations.
2. **Create an active exchange of ideas** among professionals with interest and experience in international education and the rights of disabled people.
3. **Inspire action and set an agenda** to improve education for children with disabilities in developing nations.

The session was moderated by Jim Hoxeng, CTO (Cognizant Technical Officer) of the Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity at USAID.

## SUMMARY

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### ***Introduction to USAID Education Programs***

**Greg Loos, Basic Education Team Leader, USAID**

The USAID educational focus is currently on systems and policy development with intermediate customers, such as governments and teachers, which is guided by the goals of education for all. In the future USAID will demonstrate an increasing emphasis on the linkages between education and other development issues, such as micro-economic development.

Many of the issues surrounding educating children with disabilities are sensitive and challenging to address. Currently, USAID's educational policy is not to emphasize or deemphasize disabled children. USAID's policy is to provide equal education for all children, including disabled children.

#### **Q&A**

**Q:** Can you clarify USAID's policy on educating disabled children?

**A.** USAID's policy is not to emphasize or deemphasize disabled children. They have one statement for all children instead of a strategic education statement that is specifically for disabled children.

Later in the session, Janet Allem, USAID Disability Advisor, added that while there is no USAID disability policy specific to education, there is an overarching USAID policy on disability. The USAID policy on disability is to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities both within USAID programs and in host countries where USAID has programs.

One of the main challenges to improving education for the disabled is the lack of financial resources. The Education for All (EFA) initiative is already under-funded and it appears unlikely that the donor community would be inclined to give more money. Addressing issues of disability would also present high costs to developing countries that are already failing to meet acceptable spending levels for basic education.

Education for disabled children is also complicated by logistical and implementation issues. The tendency to "punt" the issue from one ministry to the next represents one of the main challenges to improving education for disabled children. Policies also tend to be inconsistent between ministries. There is a lack of qualified teachers and good diagnostic tests for special needs children in developing countries. To properly educate these children we will need to find an alternative model to special education that does not require the ancillary services (therapists, counselors, etc.) that children in the US receive. To illustrate some of the

challenges faced by developing countries, the current goal for the teacher-to-student ratio in these countries is 1 teacher to 40 students, an environment that even when achieved would not be conducive to reaching out to children with special needs.

There are several steps that can be taken to help meet the educational needs of disabled children in developing countries. Interventions should begin at the earliest stage possible, starting with proper maternal and prenatal care to prevent and minimize disability. On an institutional level, countries should focus on the inter-ministerial policy level to improve coordination and consistency. Issues related to disability can be built into existing model programs and established schools, such as Escuela Nueva, a school in Colombia that illustrates how education reform can occur within the existing educational system. It might also be useful to create a general disability awareness program for teachers that can be delivered through training programs. Finally, to address the financial constraints surrounding the issue of education for disabled children Mr. Loos suggested reaching out to the private sector, although this approach may present its own challenges, such as which countries get support.

### **A Call to Action**

**Judith Heumann, Disability and Development Advisor, World Bank**

One of the greatest challenges to educating disabled children in developing countries is that the population of disabled children is not clearly defined. How people define the disabled? Who are these children that people assume are too costly to educate? There is a tendency to lump all disabled children together and at the same time label them too costly.

The following are just some examples of child disabilities:

- Learning disabled
- Blind and deaf
- Asthmatic
- Diabetic
- Suffering from HIV/AIDS
- Disabled due to landmines

The failure to define and respond to this population is exacerbating poor economic conditions in developing countries.

One example is school drop-outs and street children. Learning more about this population may be beneficial because there is a chance that many of them are suffering from an unrecorded or undiagnosed disability. If we knew more about their disability we could begin to improve education for these children, but right now the illiteracy rate of this population is causing an economic burden on countries. In our failure to include these children, we are ignoring an important step in our attempt to eradicate poverty.

Although we can learn from the U.S. model on education and disability, planners also should realize that we cannot simply take a model that worked in a developed country and expect it to work in a developing country. A developing world model might include the following elements:

- a focus on teacher training programs, to include the type of training that will allow teachers to be successful in educating disabled children.
- increased physical accessibility of schools. Right now there is no accessibility requirement tied to World Bank loans for school construction. Policies that require accessibility in new and renovated schools around the world could make a significant difference in the number of disabled children that attend school.

Finally, what is needed is a paradigm shift. The disability advocacy community needs to challenge the people who say it would be too costly to educate these children. We would never hear that we cannot educate girls because it is too costly. We need to start talking with a positive voice and change the  $0+0=0$  equation for these disabled children.

### **The Current Response**

**Robert Prouty, Lead Education Specialist, World Bank**

The Education for All initiative is far from being reached. Education for All, or EFA, cannot just mean EFUB (Education for All Urban Boys) or EFUBG (Education for All Urban Boys and Girls), which is increasingly the case. Education for All means education for all.

Out of 670 million school age children, 67 million, about 10 percent, have some kind of disability. In addition, we need to compare children who are not in school and children with disabilities and analyze the overlap. Statistics point to the fact that, anywhere from one quarter to one half of children out of school have some form of disability. In Togo, for example, forty percent of children are repeating every single year. A number of these children could have some form of disability.

The current attempt to educate disabled children in developing countries is being done in a marginalized fashion; there is a need to make disability issues mainstream. To date there is no disability policy for school construction, the sector that is allocated the largest amount of World Bank education funds, and for textbook production. In the area of teacher education policy, only two references to helping teachers develop inclusive approaches have been found. There has been no mention of disability in the conversations on gender and development.

The focus of the World Bank is still on preventing disability through means such as the promotion of in-school health education and prevention of river blindness, but they intend to move beyond this. The following are examples of what is currently being done

at the World Bank as a starting point to educate disabled children in developing countries:

- recently hired Disability and Development Advisor, Judy Heumann
- currently commissioning a study of disabilities, which the World Bank plans to use in the development of education policy.
- begin working on a specific policy statement on school construction and disability.
- requested that Fast Track programs include a reference to disabled children.
- planning meeting with UNESCO to improve data collection and reporting on disabilities.

The education of disabled children in developing countries is not a linear issue. Planners should focus on taking a whole system approach by doing a systemic analysis and including education for disabled children in actions to address education quality overall. Planners should look at how to increase overall participation in schools and connect that to the disability community. Educating disabled children should be a mainstream education issue and not considered a separate objective.

## **Discussion**

### **A Need for More Data**

Lack of data was brought up as a key concern in the development of an agenda for education, disability, and development. Increased data will be necessary to determine any connection between dropouts, street children, and disabilities. There are virtually no data on disability at the World Bank but they are starting to collect some. In general, the perception that these data might be too difficult to collect acts as a barrier to being able to effectively analyze the situation. Another challenge in collecting data is that organizations, especially those in Scandinavia that are concerned about these issues, are reluctant to separate out factors related to disability when doing their data collection. One approach suggested was to ask UNESCO to increase their collection of disability related data.

### **Integration with Other Development Issues**

Participants felt that it was important to integrate disability with other development issues. Examples include educating children that are disabled as a result of their working environment, analyzing the connection between dropouts and disability, and looking at the connection between malnourishment and disability. Countries with significant migrant populations, such as Mexico, might also deserve a closer look in terms of education and disability.

## **Current Opportunities**

Several policy and programmatic opportunities were discussed for forwarding an agenda to educate children with disabilities. First, the World Bank Fast Track Initiative guidelines are still being developed and it might be possible to push for inclusion of language related to disability. Also, some governments have laws and statutes, but they have not acted on them, while others do not have any laws or statutes related to educating children with disabilities. We need to help governments develop and implement national policies, not just undertake small initiatives, and we need to make sure existing laws related to education and disability are enforced. NGOs can play an important role because they are developing model programs that can be adopted on a larger scale by government.

## **Increasing Awareness**

One of the strategies identified was to increase awareness of disability and education via a collaborative effort, both at the government level and throughout all segments of society. It was felt that in developing countries there is no clear voice pushing for change on these issues and awareness-raising can be accomplished at relatively minimal cost. The stigma surrounding disability and the fear people have of “catching” disability are additional issues that can be addressed through raising awareness.

Several approaches to increasing awareness about the educational needs of disabled children were mentioned. The community of people interested in these issues should start writing letters to high-level individuals. Stories and anecdotes about educating children with disabilities can be used to help people understand the issues and see the potential for change. The issue could also be elevated and made more compelling if looked at from an economic and human rights standpoint. Networking the parents of disabled children in developing countries was discussed as an important opportunity for raising awareness as well as for improving education at a local level.

### **UNESCO Flagship on Disability** **Jerry Mindes, UNESCO**

The Dakar Forum was disappointing because disability had gotten pushed aside. In response, the International Working Group on Disability and Development last year created an Education for All (EFA) task force, or flagship, for the purpose of getting disability on the EFA agenda. UNESCO is responsible for monitoring the progress of the flagship in this area.



## Q&A

**Q.** Why aren't NGOs included in the flagship? Any education effort needs to involve local NGOs.

**A.** Agreed. One of the things we have done is to ask participating funders to bring in experts from developing countries, which we hope will increase participation from NGOs and should expose us to the reality of the situation on the ground.

The Disability flagship name was developed to reflect that educating the disabled is a fundamental issue of human rights and with those rights come obligations. The education goals that came out of Dakar will not be achieved unless disability is included.

There are eight flagships in total working with UNESCO to meet the goals of EFA. Each flagship is focused on a particular topic such as teacher training, early childhood education, and school health and nutrition. The disability flagship is open to anyone willing to work on the issue. The flagship will play a convening role for individuals interested in the topic. The disability flagship will seek to bridge those varied interests as well as collaborate with other flagships.

## **Audio Textbooks**

**Walter Sherwin, Development Consultant**

Previous work with Reading for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFB&D) suggests the use of audio textbooks for the education of disabled children in developing countries could fill an educational void. Research suggests that a mere 5 percent of the visually impaired in developing countries go to school. The use of audio textbooks can enable the disabled to continue their education and it can boost their self-respect.

RFB&D produces audio textbooks in the United States for close to 100,000 people. According to Michele Herrington, RFB&D Executive Director, their audio textbook program has the potential to make a tremendous impact. As an example of their impact in the United States, Herrington spoke of a man who had become so frustrated with his inability to read that he dropped out of school and began a vocational trade. With the help of RFB&D and their audio textbook program he was able to return to school and eventually earn an advanced degree. That man is now a board member. Such an example illustrates how ignoring the learning disabled can mean a loss of significant potential to a country or society.

## Q&A

- Q.** What about countries where they speak multiple languages? There are 72 languages in Zambia, how would this program handle that situation?
- A.** Yes that is a challenge, but not all of the languages are taught in school. The audio textbook program would use whatever languages are taught in school and are present in the textbooks.
- Q.** Local NGOs may be developing similar solutions. Would the money be better used if given to local NGOs rather than producing everything at a central office?
- A.** The program would partner with local NGOs and possibly utilize strategies and products that already exist. In addition, all audio textbooks will be locally-produced.

## Discussion

The feasibility of an audio textbook program is complicated by the lack of resources available. In many developing countries people are dealing with basic needs such as food and health; many of the communities have no electricity. The question of access to resources and the inclusion of ordinary schools is also important. In Peru, audio textbooks were available only to the elite. Planners need to “keep it real” by looking to low-tech solutions for educating the disabled that will ensure equity. A universal design for the audiotapes should also be considered.

The issue of recruiting countries to participate in an audio textbook program is an additional concern and it is important to select countries wisely for the pilot projects. In many countries, more than one ministry would be involved, and therefore it might be challenging to gather the unified support necessary for implementation.

One possible benefit of a pilot activity like the proposed audio textbook program would be that it would show that disabled children can learn. One of the biggest challenges to overcome is that we don't have expectations for these children. One goal should be the inclusion of parents. We need to be able to show parents that these children can learn. We should be working to help raise expectations and sustainability in these programs.

## **Update on Disability Rights Treaty**

**Joelle Balfe, National Council on Disability**

There is currently no human rights law for disability. The mainstream human rights community doesn't currently recognize disability as falling under their scope of work. Instead, the disability cause is seen as a charity topic.

The UN, however, has already had one meeting on the development of a treaty on the rights of people with disabilities. All of the issues discussed today can be tied back to human rights, a notion that resonates with a broad spectrum of people. Focusing on the human rights of people with disabilities has great potential to increase the available resources for this issue. For example, the amount of funding for gender issues increased dramatically within ten years of passing the treaty on the human rights of women.

## **Next Steps for Action and Opportunities for Partnership**

### **Group Discussion**

One of the biggest challenges in the education of children with disabilities is the general lack of awareness about the issue. It is important to collect more data in order to get these children on the education agenda. The Household Education Survey usually finds that students drop out because they are not interested in school. It would be useful to add a disability expert to help design the survey and determine which of the drop-outs have a disability. Instead of using global school boundaries, an intensive demographic study in a small area can be used to find out who is being excluded. This would make it easier to isolate disability as a factor.

Another element in coordinating efforts to improve opportunities for disabled children is gathering support from the various groups already involved. The disability organizations in the U.S. and Europe are too parochial; they tend to have a narrow, domestic focus as opposed to an international focus. We need to expand the focus of US organizations. At the government level we need to write letters to the US Congress and to international development donor organizations. We also need a coordinating mechanism between ministries in countries where education programs for disabled children take place. Finally, there should be great efforts to educate parents along with their children; we need to prove to the parents, communities and the children themselves that they can learn.

In summary, the group felt a need to work at the policy level, but planners should not wait for policies to be put in place. They should start working from the ground up. What is needed are practical solutions that set an example, new ways to communicate, and increased communication among those who are already working to educate children with disabilities in developing countries.